

FARM RATING ISSUES

The Buchan township may be just a dot on the map that is East Gippsland but its issues reflect concerns across rural Australia, not just the prolonged drought but unsustainable pressure on the nation's food producers. People from Buchan, Gelantipy, Canni Creek, The Basin and Toorloo Arm came to meet with Independent State election Candidate, Matt Stephenson to discuss their concerns. He was told that exacerbating drought hardship there had been significant rate hikes – even up 98% on the previous year.

The extended drought was of immediate concern but there is underlying concern with all levels of government using primary producers as a major tax/rate source. Unlike many other countries in the world where food production is actually subsidized, here farmers are being increasingly burdened with rates and taxes. Speakers to the Buchan meeting described the present system as inequitable and unsustainable. Rates are based on revaluations determined by sale potential rather than income from the property.

The rates charged have no relationship to services provided. Over the past decades, Local Government has allowed cost shifting from both State and Federal levels, taking on more and more areas - social, cultural, physical etc - paid for by ratepayers, with an ever-expanding and influential bureaucracy driving this. Concern was expressed at the growing extravagance of Council administration, its high costs of governance, propaganda department, ready employment of lawyers, consultants and interstate flights.

As pointed out in a VFF Parliamentary Submission in 2015 an unsustainable burden is being carried by farmers with in some shires farm businesses paying upwards of 60% of Council revenue while representing less than 10% of ratepayers

Clearly changes would be unpopular to ruling parties with such dependence on this unfair system. But the effects must be taken in account. The farming population is aging and their offspring generally moving to more lucrative professions. This has created a decline in populations in rural communities across the land, a loss of social value and commitment to food production.

In places such as Britain faced with near starvation during the Second World War, the crucial value of food production is well understood. Here in Australia we are taxing our producers to the limit.

We used to be told that Australia's future was secure, to become the exporting food bowl to Asia with its burgeoning millions. But what is now happening is that our governments are allowing, even encouraging, foreign buyers to systematically buy out our natural assets. This is short term thinking, this so-called "investment". Land purchase by overseas interests should not be allowed.

There is a desperate need to reappraise the value of food production in Australia. We live on a big continent but the area of fertile land is already shrinking with climate change and the encroachment of cities. To sell what we do have is deeply irresponsible. Without clear-sighted Government leadership we are sleep walking towards disaster.

Linette Treasure, Buchan.